

Post Sutler

The sutler was a civilian who sold goods to soldiers. He set up a store outside Fort Point. The list of items he sold is almost endless -- food, newspapers and journals, tobacco, shoe blacking, spoons and forks, clothing and many luxuries such as canned milk, fruit, vegetables and fish. The Army did not consider writing supplies important, so soldiers had to buy pens, pencils, ink wells and wooden desks from the sutler if they wanted to write letters home.

Sutlers sometimes made their own money. Usually they had metal tokens, about the size of a penny, or small cardboard "chits." The sutler's name, unit and value were stamped or printed on the "chit." So, soldiers bought with money and received change in tokens. By replacing real money with their own tokens or "chits," sutlers made sure that the soldiers had to come back and spend the rest of their pay in the sutler's store. Sometimes soldiers used the tokens as prizes in their games of poker.

Sutlers offered officers special gifts so that they would not report them for overcharging the soldiers. But this was a big risk for the officer; if he were caught, he could be court-martialed. Still, many sutlers were able to charge very high prices for their services. Some sutlers sold their goods for as much as five times what they paid for it! Because the sutler's prices were so high, soldiers often thought of these civilians as both a necessity and a nuisance.

Life for the Sutler

The post sutler at Fort Point from 1861 to 1864 was named E.B. Willitson.

Every military post could have one sutler, to be appointed by the Secretary of War.

A sutler held the job for three years, unless the commanding officer took it away because the sutler did not follow the rules.

If there were an empty building, the sutler could use it for his store. He was responsible for keeping it in good working order. If there were no building, the sutler could construct one nearby. The sutler did not receive living quarters, transportation for himself or his goods, or any military pay.

All prices had to be posted in the store.

The sutler could not allow a soldier to be in debt to him for more than 1/3 of the soldier's monthly pay (about \$4.00 in debt).

Three days before the last of every month, the sutler gave the commander a note telling all the charges he had for enlisted men. The note was presented to the men for payment. The sutler sat at the pay table with his books and accounts, and received payment from the soldiers under the watchful eye of the commanding officer.

The sutler's main competition came from the family of the soldiers. Packages sent from home contained items such as canned food, clothing, writing supplies, medicine, personal articles and family mementos.

Soldiers at Fort Point also could buy goods in stores in San Francisco. But it was difficult to shop in San Francisco because they did not have much free time, and the trip to the city was long and they would have to pay a fare on the omnibus.